

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 12 April 2021

Headline: Commentary: What a delayed political succession means for Singapore

Commentary: What a delayed political succession means for Singapore



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat has decided that it is “in the best interests of the nation” for him to step aside as the leader of the fourth-generation (4G) team. He explained that he would have “too short a runway” as prime minister by the time he takes over after the pandemic is over.

It is not a leadership crisis yet. Much will depend on how the 4G leaders handle this severe setback.

The uncertainty of who will succeed Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong could undermine trust and confidence in the 4G leadership as a whole.

Mr Heng’s decision has, unsurprisingly, generated talk that he has been forced out, partly due to his East Coast Group Representation Constituency team’s lacklustre performance in the July 2020 General Election (GE).

Mr Heng’s People’s Action Party (PAP) team won 53.4 per cent of the popular vote against the Workers’ Party team.

The evolving “crisis of a generation” and its unpredictable arc, the geopolitical tensions between China and the United States, and the heightened vulnerabilities of a city-state in an increasingly insecure world have conspired for a protracted handover of power from the 3G to the 4G.

In November 2020, I wrote in a TODAY commentary that Mr Heng’s tenure as the 4G premier would be impacted should there be an inordinate delay in his succeeding Mr Lee.

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 12 April 2021

Headline: Commentary: What a delayed political succession means for Singapore

Mr Heng would have “too short a runway to stamp his mark before the next GE”. I never expected that those concerns would come to pass but, alas, they have.

TOO SHORT A RUNWAY?

When Mr Heng was designated the successor to Mr Lee in 2018, the ruling PAP was gearing for a GE that was probably Mr Lee’s last as the PAP’s secretary-general. Mr Lee had said that he would like to hand over power before he turns 70 in February 2022.

But when the Covid-19 pandemic descended upon the world, it upended plans for the handover of power at some point in the current term of government which ends on Aug 23, 2025.

Mr Lee has vowed to see the crisis through before stepping down.

This reflects the political elites’ steadfast belief that Singapore should not change its top leadership amid a crisis, and the imperative for an outgoing PM to hand to his successor a clean slate.

Consequently, with Mr Lee likely to stay on for a few more years, Mr Heng felt he would be too old to have any meaningful tenure.

The pandemic has meant that the political realities then, when Mr Heng was named as Mr Lee’s successor, and now are vastly different.

The political runway is abruptly shortened for Mr Heng and, to a smaller extent, his younger 4G colleagues.

Mr Lee’s extending his tenure as PM would require his successor to recognise that even as his runway would be longer than Mr Heng’s, his tenure may not be as long as his predecessors.

Otherwise, there will be a knock-on effect on the putative 5G leadership.

NO ALTERNATIVE TO GETTING IT RIGHT

In finding the successor to Mr Lee, the 4G leaders must get it right this time — choosing someone who will be able to serve about a decade as PM and stepping down in his mid-60s, which the first two prime ministers did.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew and Mr Goh Chok Tong was PM for 31 years (1959-1990) and 14 years (1990-2004) respectively.

Mr Lee was 67 and Mr Goh was 63 when they resigned as PM. Mr Lee is now in his 17th year as PM.

Mr Heng had in 2018 chosen Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing as his deputy. But with Mr Heng stepping aside, the 4G leaders will select afresh.

They will probably be looking not so much at one individual this time but also at the pair who would make for the best combination for the 4G PM and Deputy PM.

Publication: TODAY Online

Date: 12 April 2021

Headline: Commentary: What a delayed political succession means for Singapore

The pandemic has wrought significant changes to many facets of life, including politics and governance. Singaporeans' demands and expectations of the Government and governance have and will change, accelerated by the pandemic.

It is of utmost importance to have a clear successor to Mr Lee within the next 12-18 months. Singapore has thrived by having clear and strong leadership that is able to inspire trust and confidence and to deal with immediate concerns and plan long term.

The lack of clarity on who the next premier is can easily be misconstrued as uncertainty and potential instability in the future. Furthermore, it will take time for the new successor to connect with the ground.

Fundamental attributes such as the leader being someone who can not only hold the team together but also bring out the individual and collective best are critical.

It is not merely about keeping Singapore on the well-traversed path of success because that may no longer be relevant or feasible given technological advancements, the geopolitical rivalries and tensions in East and Southeast Asia.

Transformational leadership in this context is vital. The leader who can see beyond the horizon of what a post-Covid world portends and is able to keep Singapore relevant, thriving, and cohesive is what Singapore needs in a 4G prime minister.

The search for Mr Heng's successor presents a new test for Singapore's leaders.

While haste is not desirable, the Government must avoid the triple whammy of inordinate delays: The naming of Mr Lee's new successor; Mr Lee handing over power to his successor; and the transition from the 4G to 5G leadership.

Moreover, what is different this time from the 2018 selection is that we are in the midst of a global pandemic, which can provide a real crucible to test the mettle and integrity of the 4G leaders and how transformational they are.

The leadership renewal amid the pandemic requires the 4G leaders, individually and collectively, to remain focused on the utmost priority of keeping the country safe and to prepare Singapore and Singaporeans for what promises to be a radically different post-Covid world.

They will also have to ensure team unity and cohesion despite some expected "jostling" in the quest to be the first among equals.

The 3G and 4G leaders will have to ensure that the competition and rivalry among the front-runners is healthy, productive, and clarifying. Any division will not augur well for Singapore.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eugene K B Tan is associate professor of law at the Singapore Management University and a former Nominated Member of Parliament.